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Al-Jumhuriya talks to veteran Lebanese journalist Michael Young about the parallels and distinctions between today’s mass protests in Lebanon and the 2005 “Cedar Revolution.”

For twenty-eight days and counting, nationwide protests have rocked the length and breadth of Lebanon, causing the government to resign, and disrupting daily life in major ways. Arterial highways have been blocked off; banks, schools, and businesses have closed; while demonstrators fill the streets and squares at all hours from the extreme north to the deep south. On Tuesday night, events turned bloody as an army member fatally shot a demonstrator at a roadblock south of Beirut. Initially dubbed an intifada, or uprising, the movement has since come to be seen by many as a full-blown revolution; one aiming to fundamentally overhaul the country's political system.

On Saturday, 9 November, Al-Jumhuriya spoke about the extraordinary upheaval with the veteran Lebanese journalist Michael Young at his Beirut home. Young is the author of The Ghosts of Martyrs Square, an acclaimed account of Lebanon's mass protests in 2005, sometimes called the Cedar Revolution, which brought an end to the Syrian regime's 29-year occupation of the country. A prominent commentator on Lebanon, the wider region, and much else besides, Young has written over the years for the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, Slate, and The National, among others. For many years he edited the opinion page of the Lebanese Daily Star, and today he edits the Diwan publication of the Carnegie Middle East Center. What follows is a transcript of our conversation, which can also be heard as an audio podcast via the link below.

Al-Jumhuriya: Michael, thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us. I'd like to start with your book in mind, because I found myself leafing through it a few days ago

while doing some writing of my own, as though looking for guidance or wisdom of some unspecified kind. The book's title of course makes reference to Martyrs Square, which is one of the principal squares in downtown Beirut, and was the epicenter of the 2005 protests. Today, the Lebanese have returned to Martyrs Square, in what are surely the largest demonstrations since 2005. I wonder if it feels to you like a comparable moment, not necessarily in terms of precise numbers and headcount, but in terms of significance, be it political, social, cultural, historical?

Michael Young: Well, I think there is a fundamental difference in the two events, the 2005 demonstrations and what we're seeing today. 2005 was a moment of fleeting hope in the aftermath of the assassination of [Prime Minister] Rafiq Hariri. There was hope that this Syrian presence, the 29-year Syrian presence that you mentioned, finally would be ended. And so we felt that we were on the verge of a new moment in Lebanese contemporary history. Today, we do feel we're on the verge of a new moment in contemporary Lebanese history, but it's in no way a hopeful moment. Essentially, we are today on the verge of an economic collapse; the collapse of the credibility of the political class in general; the collapse of the post-war system; the collapse of the post-Taif system, the system established at Taif. In a sense we're really in very much a bleaker moment in Lebanon.

So, Martyrs Square has often symbolized many things to the Lebanese. It was the center of the old city. In 2005 it sort of was, very interestingly, it was a place at the center of Beirut which brought together Christians and Muslims; it was almost a symbol of the unity at the time that took place. The unity minus a major community, I would say: the

Shia who were supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement. That was one missing component.

Today, we can say, however, that I think it truly is a place or a space where all Lebanese are coming together. Today, the protests are not really politically oriented in the sense that it's for one side or another. It really is a genuine national disgust with the way the country has been mismanaged in the last two and a half decades. And so in a sense Martyrs Square today symbolically may be much more of a unifying symbol than it was in 2005.

Al-Jumhuriya: In the introduction to your book—because one of the things I'm hoping to do in this interview is to explore the parallels that may exist, but also definitely the distinctions, between 2005 and today's protests—you write in the book's introduction of 2005 that there was, and I quote, a "rising feeling among more than a few Lebanese […] that what was taking place at Martyrs Square was the possibility of a revolution, an opportunity for a metamorphosis of their society into something more modern, where a citizen could be a citizen, not the factotum of a religious community; where political leaders could be held accountable to the law, not behave as overbearing patriarchs; and where (it was never quite expressed this way) everyone could fall into a fraternal embrace so often eluding the Lebanese, usually defined by their differences and parochial agendas."Young, Michael, The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle, Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 4. Now, you went on to say that you were never quite so hopeful as that yourself. But it does sound uncannily similar to me to what we hear from many demonstrators today. Observers tend to cite the 2015 protests sparked by a waste disposal crisis as

the immediate predecessor of today's demonstrations. But is there a sense, do you think, in which 2005 is the real genesis, and that currently protesters are picking up where it left off and where it went astray?

Young: No, I don't think I would go that far, to be honest. I think today what it is, it's as I said, we're in a very different mood today. This is not really political in the sense that, you know, 2005 began with an event. Namely an assassination. And this assassination gelled opposition to what I would say was a vampirical Syrian system in Lebanon; a system of corruption, of control, and ultimately a system that was undermining the credibility or the sovereignty of the Lebanese state. I'm not saying that these ingredients don't exist today. There is a revolt against the vampirical behavior of the political class. But I think what we're seeing is something much more fundamental today. It's basically a lot of Lebanese simply feel that they have been insulted in the last decades by a political class that has robbed them of their money, that has polluted their environment, that has poisoned their air, that has destroyed all possibility of hope for their children, that has essentially undermined and destroyed Lebanon. In Lebanon, the political system is a system that has been run essentially like a farm. In other words, they have left no hope for Lebanese. Economically speaking, the country has remained between a life support system and periods which have been a bit better, but economically Lebanon has not thrived in the last decade, let's say. And what we see is that in fact we're losing all our youth, and I think it's not a surprise today that a fundamental part of this protest movement is the youth. Young Lebanese have no hope in the future. They have no hope. They can't get good jobs in this country. They don't feel that they can raise their families in this country. And

sort of all this came together to basically make the Lebanese feel that they were being, on a daily basis, insulted by this political class.

Now, to be perfectly clear-eyed about this, the Lebanese are also responsible, because they have brought back time and again this very political class. The people who have abused them, who have robbed them—because today we are talking literally, in economic terms, of robbery, and we can get to that perhaps later on in the interview—the people who have literally robbed them are the people who time and again come back to power because they are elected by the Lebanese. And so to a certain extent I think the society today has realized that they have been essentially fooled. And, more bothersome for them, they feel that they have been complicit in this generalized system of theft that has been put in place. And they have. So I would like to say it's the political class, it's not the society, but we're all in a way complicit, or we have been complicit, in a system that has been systematically mismanaged and effectively a system of organized, national-level theft by a corrupt political class, by the banks, at the top of which you have the Central Bank governor, in which we Lebanese for a long time went along, because there were certain benefits even for us in this. And so unfortunately all this suddenly, it's basically melting. We have this situation where it's all collapsing. And so this is very different in a way than 2005, if I may just underline that point. This is much more fundamental.

Al-Jumhuriya: You've had some very stark and alarming words on that question on Twitter in recent days. You ~~wrote~~ two days ago, "Lebanon's economic collapse has already begun, but we have no leadership. The president is

delaying forming a government because he wants his son-in-law to be included, the political class is in a daze, and banks have insufficient liquidity. The country is completely adrift." That's what you're getting at here?

Young: Yeah, and I think the government formation process is probably even more complicated than I described it there. I don't think it's just a question of [former Foreign Minister] Gebran Bassil and President [Michel] Aoun wanting to bring him back. I think now there are other complications in the government formation process. But essentially you have a political class that has no solution to this disaster which they've created. They don't know what to do. All they know is that they want to survive politically, because if they don't survive politically, and you actually have the emergence of a credible government in Lebanon, a lot of these people may, they feel, end up in jail. Or if not in jail, at least a credible Lebanese state will ask for the money of these people; the money that they have essentially siphoned out of the system.

Now in terms of the liquidity crisis, this is a fundamental problem we have today. A majority of Lebanese consume imports. The country imports most of its vital resources. The fact is we don't have today enough money to pay for this. The banks are in a panic because they know that if people go and withdraw their funds, the banks will collapse. Essentially banks have closed down. They're not giving people their money. People don't have money; how do they live? But at the same time there's no liquidity in the economy that allows the banks to remove these restrictions. And what that means is Lebanon cannot pay for imports. So what happens then? This is, when you think about it, it's a disaster. And there is absolutely no effort to

find a solution for this. But this is fundamental to the situation today.

Al-Jumhuriya: In fact you had just yesterday the head of the hospital syndicate warning that without dollars they'll be unable to replenish urgent medical supplies.

Young: Absolutely, but you see the problem is this: how did this scheme work? Essentially, we put our money in the banks. OK. The Central Bank offered treasury bills at very high interest rates. The banks took the money that we had placed in the banks, our money, and they basically put this money into buying high-yield treasury bills. So our money has gone into paper. In the meantime, we were promised that in fact we have liquidity, we have foreign currency reserves in the range of 30 to 40 billion dollars. We realize today that in fact this liquidity doesn't exist. In other words, you know, maybe on paper we have this amount of money, but in reality when it comes to liquidity, foreign currency, we don't have that amount of money. And in fact that's what we're facing today. The most dramatic problem at this moment in time particularly is we don't have enough liquidity and we don't have enough money to buy imports. This is a dramatic situation for a country that is almost entirely reliant on imports.

Al-Jumhuriya: Meanwhile you have major rating agencies like Moody's joining others in downgrading Lebanon's credit score. You have the World Bank regional director urging the formation of a cabinet within this coming week to restore international confidence. It almost has echoes, well it definitely has echoes, I would say, of Greece circa 2008.

Young: No, Greece is better than this, I think. Greece is

better. Greece had the European Union, who was willing to back up Greece. Greece also was not, you know Greece may have been mismanaged, but the levels, we have to understand that the Lebanese system was a system of organized theft. And when I say this what I mean is exactly that. Essentially it was a scheme where the political class drew on the money that we had put in the banks to basically finance their own corruption. And the Central Bank, even though it knew of this, constantly tried to roll over the debt, knowing that large amounts of money were being plundered by the political class. This was a system of state-level theft. And the thing is, Greece, you know, was in the European Union. There was some kind of limit. Maybe the Greeks didn't pay taxes, maybe there was corruption at a certain level, definitely. But at the end of the day this is worse than Greece. This is worse than Greece.

Al-Jumhuriya: And so, given that, and if we are in store for worse days ahead, might that breathe even more oxygen into the protest movement and the demonstrations?

Young: Well, you see, what I'm worried about, is that as the economic situation gets worse, people are going to begin to, you know, people need to live. And of course there is a very high likelihood that things will get worse, in terms of the violence, in terms of the protests. But at the same time, if you don't have money, you can't get money, you can't pay for your children's schools, you can't pay for medicine, also there is a certain level of passivity that may settle in. This is what worries me. What worries me is that the political class today is incapable of forming a government. I don't think that they are delaying because it's a conscious decision. I think the conditions set by [resigned Prime Minister] Saad Hariri are not conditions that are going to be

accepted by the other political sides, including Hezbollah and the Aounist movement. And so there's no agreement at that level. But at some point they will see that if you exhaust the society economically, the willingness to accept a government that brings together the different political forces which the public has rejected would go up. In other words that the public, exhausted, would be willing to accept another political government. I don't know. I hope that's not the case, because I don't think it will work.

Al-Jumhuriya: I definitely want to come back to cabinet formation, but first another distinction with 2005, I would say, and I'd like to hear your thoughts, is that 2005 was still ultimately elite-driven. I mean as you note in the book, on the day of March 14 itself, party politicians were giving speeches. People like Bahia Hariri, Akram Chehayeb, Ahmad Fatfat. The crowds were in large part mobilized by party machinery. Today it's precisely the opposite, it's a leaderless mass of politically unaffiliated, non-partisan citizens revolting against all parties without exception, including those who were present on 14th March. This is perhaps best captured in the ubiquitous slogan which may seem simple but is actually quite profound in its implications: killon ya'ni killon, meaning "We're against all of them, and all of them means all of them." So what's the significance of that? Is that a strength or a weakness, to be independent and leaderless and unaffiliated?

Young: Yeah, definitely I think it's a strength in this particular situation. Because as you said quite rightly, in 2005 this was driven, it was elite-driven. And after the 14th of March the political elite essentially disappointed the people in the street by demobilizing their followers. Now, maybe at the time, it wasn't a bad thing for it to be elite-

driven, because you know one has to be careful. When you have mass demonstrations, mass crowds, this can very easily turn ugly. But what we're seeing today, up to now, this has sort of reflected a certain national solidarity. The fact that, you know, these people are leaderless has effectively meant that it's very difficult to suffocate these demonstrations. It's not clear who you have to target to silence the people. Ultimately, if you don't have a leader, it's the mass itself that becomes the leader and becomes the driving force. And that's why, for example, you take Hezbollah, which, two weeks ago, Hassan Nasrallah was taking a position effectively against the popular protests. He made two speeches in which he was sounding more and more hostile to the demonstrations. And then Hariri resigned. And the next day Nasrallah also made a speech, or perhaps it was the same day, in which he actually walked back his tone, because Hezbollah realized that ultimately it cannot afford to undermine its own credibility against a mass movement like this one. And I think Hezbollah was among the first to realize that the fragility of the system posed a real risk to its power. And they were right. Ultimately, they were right, that what took place on the 17th of October was an explosion at the national level that was very profound against the political class. And I think what Nasrallah also realized is the political class did not have a response to this.

Al-Jumhuriya: Does it also, however, weaken the protesters' leverage when it comes to—for example—cabinet formation? Protesters are talking generally of perhaps a technocratic, non-partisan, clean-handed cabinet of competent specialists. We sort of hear this vaguely from a large number of them. And yet yesterday, Hezbollah's Naim Qassem declared Hezbollah will be in the next cabinet.

President Aoun, I think it's fair to say, appears unwilling to countenance a government that doesn't include his party, and specifically his son-in-law, who has been probably the single largest target of vitriol and abuse from protesters, and I certainly won't repeat on this family-friendly podcast the now-famous chant about him. So if Hezbollah and Aoun are going to insist on having a seat at the next table, we can assume that the other usual suspects will too. Where does that leave the protesters? Is this a circle can be squared?

Young: Well, we have to see first of all if Hariri is willing to form a political government. From my information, Hariri is not willing today to form a political government. He is not, very simply. And on top of this, I'm not sure, but I've heard reports, I've heard rumors, let me say, that the Americans don't want Hezbollah in the next government. So Hariri is in a position where it's very difficult for him to form a government. The situation is suddenly becoming immensely more complicated. Now I can't confirm this news about Hezbollah not being in the government, but what I can say is that today a political government is not one that's going to fly with the people in the street. And so Hariri understands, I think, that something is broken. Now, whether he can put together, in a climate of continued economic breakdown, sort of a mixed government, where essentially he would have people who he can sell as technocrats, who would be connected in one way or another with some of the political parties, but who themselves are not regarded as corrupt, whether he can put together that kind of a government and sell it to the political parties, and also sell it to the public. This is a possibility. I'm not saying that this will happen, but I'm saying that under the circumstances—because on a daily

basis the economic situation is deteriorating; pressure is building up—this may be a possibility.

But let me be very clear about one thing: the people are right to say that they want a clean government. This is their right. And this is their fundamental right. And at the same time they've been robbed by the political class. So this is not an excessive demand in any way. But at the same time, we have to be very clear-eyed about one thing. A technocratic government that is independent of the political class is a government that cannot succeed. Because ultimately the political class has all the instruments—even if they're not in government—to block a technocratic government. They are the ones who've named members of the civil service for the last three decades. They're the ones who, in one way or another, control the street if and when the government takes unpopular decisions, so that they can immediately mobilize their people. If, for example, the technocratic government basically responds to the international community and begins to remove people from their jobs, from the bloated civil service, the political class can use these people against a technocratic government. So, while I understand perfectly the motivation in calling for a technocratic government, I think we have to be realistic and understand that we need some kind of political cover for any government that's in place.

Al-Jumhuriya: And on that note, looking beyond cabinet, which may in any case be something of either a lost cause or a red herring, what other ways might demonstrators convert or invest all this momentum and energy into lasting change for the better? Ideas one often hears thrown around are early parliamentary elections, a new electoral law, structural changes to the system itself. Moving beyond

cabinet.

Young: Well, obviously, what we need today is to see if this society, which says that it wants revolution, has the means to create alternative political parties to the zaims [sectarian chieftains]. If it can actually transcend sectarianism. I mean there are many things that you can do to circumvent or to weaken the sectarian system. I have to be very honest with you, I think they cannot succeed in weakening the sectarian system. But there are ways to create political forces that can gain popular support that are outside of the traditional political leadership. In other words, we've seen ~~efforts~~ in the past by civil society to establish political parties. What I'm talking about today is something much more powerful than that. What they need to do is create, on a national level, a much broader political organization that in a way can function not only at the national level but at the local level. And I'm someone who strongly believes that if you want to challenge the political class in Lebanon today, you have to be much more active at the local level. Because I think there is a margin of maneuver at the local level that is actually considerably larger than many people believe. And remember at the local level, when you vote for local councils, it's not sectarian. Now, why do I focus a bit on the local level? Because it's at the local level that in a way you can improve people's lives. It's where people can really feel a difference in their daily life. And when I say local, I don't mean small villages. That of course applies, but even in a city like Beirut, for example, the capital of the country, which is much more than, it's not a village, but it really is a place where control of the local council would have a major impact on how people perceive the management of independent political forces. Beirut has been mismanaged as a city for a long time. It's been ruined as a city to my

mind. And so in answer to your broader question, what can people do, how can they carry over the mood of this uprising, the only logical way they can do that is by creating new political forces to try to address the fundamental problems in Lebanese society. And we all know what the problems are. Everything from trash collection to electricity. We're talking about the basic things in life. The trash collection issue was essentially a mafia to generate money for the political class. So what do we do? The political class will not consider recycling, for example, it will dump our trash in the sea, which basically ruins our coast, which can be a great source of revenue for Lebanon. I mean there are a million and one ways in which the political class has effectively ruined the country and ruined the country's possibility to improve, simply because they want to finance their own greed and their own political activity. So this is where I think these political forces that are active in the movement today should work. But can I say that I'm confident that's what will happen? I can't say I am. My fear of course is because this is a mass movement, people will only remain mobilized until their situation improves. And it may improve only temporarily. Will they have the wherewithal to push for effective change in the system? I hope the answer is yes, but I can't say I'm completely confident.

Al-Jumhuriya: I'm interested to know why you don't stress the parliamentary election side of it.

Young: I'll explain, because there is a fundamental reason for this. I don't believe, despite all the claims to the contrary, that the Lebanese are willing to give up on the sectarian system. They're not willing to give up on the sectarian system. They will say that they are, but what they

are really complaining about is the system of what is known as muhasaseh; the division of the spoils between the sectarian leaders. This is what they're complaining about, because what they've seen is the system of the division of the spoils has not come down to them. It's not trickled down to them. They've been left out of the equation. So what they do is they say we're against the sectarian system, because in effect what they are against is the greed of the sectarian leadership that has not redistributed the wealth that they've stolen from the state down to them. But I'm afraid that in the longer term this idea of wanting to challenge sectarianism will not necessarily go all the way. And we have to understand that parliamentary elections in Lebanon are fundamentally sectarian elections. People go and vote in parliament along sectarian lines. They vote for sectarian leaders. They are uncomfortable with independents, because they feel that a vote for independents is actually a lost vote. So what it could mean is, OK, I don't want to vote for my sectarian leader, I prefer to vote for an independent list, but maybe what will happen is that someone opposed to my sectarian leader will gain because of my lost vote, and therefore I prefer to go along with my sectarian leader rather than allow someone else to gain ground, which will affect the entire sect. It will not only affect my sectarian leader, it will affect the sect in general. This is the problem. It's that until this so-called opposition—I don't want "so-called" to sound dismissive—but until this sort of formless opposition can organize on a national level, whereby people will not perceive a victory by these political forces as being a loss for their particular sect, then I would say focus on the parliamentary elections. For now, it's too soon. It's too soon. What we have is a very vital popular protest movement, but one that doesn't really have any political

strategy or political direction at this point in time.

Al-Jumhuriya: I definitely also want to return to sectarianism. But first, Hezbollah, the militia/slash party that has thrown its weight, as you said, behind the government, and the president, and the status quo in general during these weeks, seems to me like the elephant in the room in many ways, in that they are, on the one hand, exceedingly powerful, heavily armed, fully prepared to use their arms on Lebanese opponents, as they demonstrated in 2008, and they have already sent men wielding sticks to the streets to assault demonstrators, break up roadblocks, demolish campsites and other installations—and yet they haven't been a central focal point, I feel, of the recent protests. They haven't been spared, true, there have been chants against their leader Hassan Nasrallah, and these have been especially courageous in the south and other parts of the country where Hezbollah dominates, but overall I just feel they've been given rather an easy ride, in proportion to their power. You don't hear chants calling for them to disarm, for example, or to stop killing people in wars abroad, almost as if these are beside the point somehow, or not relevant for the present struggle. And this is perhaps another difference with 2005. Do you think it's possible for the movement to somehow coexist in this way with Hezbollah, is a modus vivendi conceivable, or, on the contrary, does the violence that we've already witnessed, does it only underscore that true change is impossible so long as there is this heavily-armed, unaccountable entity above the law, subservient to a foreign regional power, capable at the end of the day of imposing its will at the barrel of a gun? Do technocrats really stand a chance against trained killers?

Young: Look, I think the reason, we have to understand, this was not, first of all, a political protest against one specific political party or a group. Those who want to turn what happened into a sort of anti-Hezbollah series of protests would be mistaken. As you said correctly, Hezbollah was, when people were saying, “everyone means everyone,” people meant Hezbollah and everyone else. In other words, those who propped up this corrupt mass theft that has been imposed on Lebanese society.

But people also understand, as you said again quite correctly, that Hezbollah is willing to use its weapons. So no one really opened the door of disarming Hezbollah, because it serves no purpose. No one can disarm Hezbollah today in Lebanon. All such a threat would do is make Hezbollah even more paranoid and violent than it is already. And it would perhaps also alienate a part of the Shia community, which the people in the streets don’t want to do, because for the first time there are people in the Shia community who are participating in these protests. So from a purely political perspective it’s perfectly understandable that people have not gone after the party in these protests.

But your larger question is can there be a coexistence between the party and, effectively, a functioning Lebanese state. I think the simple answer is no. I don’t think there can be. This is a point I also made in my book when I wrote it. But the point I think, what people have understood, is that in a way Hezbollah has weaknesses. Hezbollah doesn’t offer a governing model. Hezbollah is basically backed by countries that are under sanction, that are repressive, that are essentially, in the case of Iran but [also] in the case of Syria, that are failed states today. In other words Hezbollah as a model for governance, it’s not a model for governance.

Even a Shia in Lebanon who has children understands, even if he or she supports Hezbollah, understands that ultimately if he wants to send his children somewhere to get educated, he's not going to send them to Tehran, or to Damascus, he's going to try to send them to the West. And so the point is that Hezbollah, it's very powerful, but it also has lots of spaces that it doesn't fill for even its Shia supporters. So in my view it serves no purpose to today search for a head-on collision with Hezbollah. What you can do, and what I think Hassan Nasrallah understood very well in this particular protest, it's that by challenging the system in which Hezbollah had enveloped itself, this system of clan leaders, of sectarian leaders, in which it had effectively introduced itself, and had used this system to protect itself, that once this system was challenged by the protests, that this posed a fundamental threat to Hezbollah. And it worried Nasrallah. And this is why Nasrallah took a position that was seemingly so opposed to the demonstrations early on. And it discredited him, and I think Hezbollah did pay a certain price for this.

But if you're asking me in the long term what is the solution for Hezbollah, I agree with you, I don't think today there is a solution. The solution for Hezbollah is ultimately that the party, its margin of maneuver in Lebanon, if we can succeed in ensuring that the party's margin of maneuver in Lebanon is limited to a certain extent, by saying look, there is a society that is not willing to accept certain things, you can limit to a certain extent its margin of maneuver. If you can limit its margin of maneuver in terms of a conflict with Israel, that too. We should search for the things that are more achievable, you see. That's, I think, the best we can hope for today. But ultimately to disarm an army is not going to work. It's going to lead to civil war. And while civil

war may very well satisfy Israel and Hezbollah's enemies elsewhere, it's going to destroy our country, Lebanon. As Lebanese, what's the advantage of this for us? To enter into a new civil war? Against half of our population, or a part of our population? That's not a solution.

Al-Jumhuriya: You spoke earlier about sectarianism, a subject on which you've long taken an intriguing and I would say rather contrarian stance. Which is that, while in obvious ways sectarianism enshrines inequality and a kind of plain absurdity, it has also in Lebanon's case protected against tyranny of the kind seen in Assad's Syria or Saddam's Iraq. It's created what you call a "paradoxical liberalism."ibid., p. 6. And I'll quote just briefly from the book. You say, "What makes Lebanon relatively free in an unfree Middle East is that the country's sectarian system, its faults notwithstanding, has ensured that the society's parts are stronger than the state; and where the state is weak, individuals are usually freer to function."ibid., p. 12. Now when today you see this huge cross-sectarian or non-sectarian conglomerate of people, often explicitly denouncing sectarianism and positively affirming their rejection of it, do you still view the sectarian system as a necessary evil, or do you see now, perhaps for the first time, a viable alternative emerging on the horizon?

Young: Look I wish I did. But I don't. I mean I still think this is a fundamentally sectarian society. And the reflexes of sectarianism, the good reflexes; the idea of in a sense trying to manage creating an equilibrium with the system, of compromise, of communal compromise, of leaving spaces open for everyone, is not something that the Lebanese even themselves want to get rid of. Now, one thing we have to understand is that there was a

fundamental change in the post-war period, with what happened before. The post-war period was essentially built around the sectarian leaders. Economic reconstruction of the country essentially functioned, as I said, it created a system of theft. In other words, before 1975, you had a weak state, but you still had a state. State institutions mattered. The army as an institution may not have been as strong as it is today in terms of numbers, but it mattered. I mean, there was, I remember, I was a young boy at the time, but I still remember that there was a greater respect for the state. There were state institutions in Lebanon that mattered. You remember this is the system that emerged from the Chehabist years of the 1960s. [President] Charles Helou left in 1970. So the Chehabists had effectively left not long before the war in 1975. They had created a network of institutions in the state that were in fact quite valid. So the sectarian system can accept a state that is functioning. The sectarian system doesn't have to mean a dysfunctional state.

In the post-war period, however, what we had is we had sort of a system where the political leaders were functioning while the state itself was being undermined. In other words, remember that Rafiq al-Hariri, the whole principle of his reconstruction program was to circumvent state institutions. It was not to rebuild the state, it was to create parallel institutions and strengthen parallel institutions that would effectively prevent any blockage of the reconstruction program by linking a lot of these parallel institutions to his office. A classic example is the Council for Reconstruction and Development. Now I don't want to blame Hariri alone for the system. But effectively he put all the political leaders in state institutions during this reconstruction phase, and what they did is they effectively

emptied these institutions of any independent value that they had, turning them into essentially their own political terrain. And so while the state was coming back in name in the 1990s, state institutions were actually being eroded completely. They were being eroded by the Syrian regime, who cancelled the presidential election when Elias Hrawi's time came up. They extended his term. A fundamental challenge to the constitution. They brought in people who effectively, as I said, completely undermined the government institutions in which they were operating. And so, you know, this was partly driven by Hariri's desire not to have obstacles to reconstruction, but what he effectively did is he undermined the state in a way that was quite damaging after that, because, since then, the state has never managed to reestablish itself. It's become simply a plaything of the political class. This was not the case before the war.

Al-Jumhuriya: Just to put my question maybe another way, even when you see today, for example, protesters in Tripoli calling out greetings to al-Dahiya al-Janubiya and to Sur; that's to say a so-called Sunni city, a very Sunni city once branded as a kind of hotbed of jihadist "terror," hailing and greeting the southern suburbs of Beirut, which is, again, stereotyped as the [Shia] Hezbollah "stronghold," does that not suggest anything to you that people's mentalities maybe are moving forward?

Young: Look, I'll tell you, and again, this is a point I tried to make in my book. It's that today the Lebanese can unite, and this is maybe if you want to compare to 2005, what was the message in 2005? The message was that at a particular moment in time, communities can combine if they have shared interests. In 2005, Hariri was

assassinated, so the traditional enemies of the Syrian regime, particularly in the Maronite community, suddenly found that they had on their side the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and, to an extent, the Sunni community, because the Sunni leader had been assassinated. So what you had suddenly was sort of a gelling together at a moment where these communities felt that they had a common interest in uniting, a gelling together of the different communities, in pursuit of a common purpose. This is often very much a part of a sectarian system. A sectarian system doesn't have to be a system of permanent division. If you have parallel interests, different religious communities will unite. They don't necessarily have to remain divided.

And this is, I think, what we're seeing today. Today, there is a perception across the board among Lebanese that they are fighting for the same purpose; that they are fed up with a political class that has robbed them, that has plundered the country, that has destroyed the country, and therefore I'm not at all surprised that people in the north, Sunnis from the north, will essentially try to attract Shia from the south, and basically say we share a common purpose. But will they share a common purpose for everything? Unfortunately I don't think so.

Al-Jumhuriya: My penultimate question, because I'm mindful that it's a Saturday evening, and I'm sure you have more interesting things to do: it's been a truism, for as long as I've been in Lebanon at least, to say that the civil war never ended, that it lives on every day in the minds of the Lebanese, that the Lebanese are somehow just permanently incapable of ever getting over it. And for a few years now I've been wondering just how true that actually is. The war ended 29 years ago, which means that nobody

under the age of 30 today has any personal experience or recollection of it. Which means there are doctors, lawyers, university lecturers, bankers, engineers, as well as manual laborers, farmers, and of course the unemployed, for whom the war was never part of their lives, who never knew the massacres, the sieges, the shelling, the displacement. And it's in large part, as you mentioned earlier, these people under 30 who are filling the streets now. So do you think it's perhaps time to acknowledge that a new generation has arrived, one that actually is not obsessed with or traumatized by the events of the war, one for whom the past means far less than the future, and which no longer accepts to have that future shaped by a war in which it took no part? Is this not, in fact, a large part of what today's protests are about, and what they herald?

Young: Definitely yes, but let me just throw in, as someone from the previous generation who grew up during the war, that our obsession with the war is a good thing. Because what emerged from the war in our minds was that we didn't want another war. So the idea, there's often a cliché that is thrown at the Lebanese, which is that in the post-war period, the Lebanese were essentially, when you lose your memory…

Al-Jumhuriya: Amnesia.

Young: There's been a cliché thrown out at the Lebanese that in the post-war period they were living, that they had amnesia towards the war. From my own experience, that's quite untrue. The Lebanese have not had amnesia from the war. The Lebanese who went through the war are very conscious of what war means, and are very worried about any new war. So I think it's a very bad thing to forget the

war, and I don’t think many people have forgotten the war. At least certainly not among those who lived through it.

But you’re quite right, I mean there is a generational phenomenon taking place in Lebanon today. Young people today are open on the world. If they can afford to, they travel, but if they can’t afford to travel, the world is at their fingertips through the Internet, through social media. They can see what’s going on outside of Lebanon. Lebanon has absorbed a lot of what’s taking place in the West, in terms of popular culture and so on. And of course what young people see is that ultimately they are offered no opportunities in this country. The country is still being run by their parents and their grandparents. And so they’re fed up. I understand this. A young person in Lebanon, if he goes into a company, what are his chances of ever heading that company? Virtually zero. Companies here are family-owned, they’re traditional. The idea of promoting someone who is effective, a talented young person, doesn’t enter into the minds of a lot of these, the way these companies are managed. Because people don’t want people who are talented, who may ultimately challenge the traditional leadership structure of companies. I mean that’s just at a micro level.

So definitely young people in Lebanon, they have one option, it’s to leave. But it’s becoming more and more difficult for them to leave. The world is closing up. It’s not easy, as it was in 1970, for young people to pack up and leave. The Gulf no longer offers the advantages it did thirty or forty years ago. Europe is closed off. The United States is becoming more and more closed off. So in effect what they found today is they are trapped here, and they have quite rightly said, well, if I’m trapped here, I don’t want to live in

this system, I want to try and change this system. And I understand perfectly that impulse. And I hope they can succeed in doing it. I hope they can succeed even in breaking the sectarian system. But we have to throw out something, it's not enough to break things. You have to understand what worked in the past, and try to preserve what was good, and not the idea of just breaking everything. It's very complex to try to change complicated systems like the system in Lebanon. It can often create much worse situations. So I understand perfectly their impulse, but I would caution that they have to understand very well what they're working against.

Al-Jumhuriya: Finally, you were a personal friend of the late Samir Kassir, the charismatic intellectual and writer and activist who was assassinated in 2005, not longer after the Cedar Revolution in which he played an important part. He was one of around a dozen prominent critics of the Assad regime who perished in a very grisly campaign of bombings that year and the years that followed, and I expect you knew others among them as well. These are some of the ghosts of Martyrs Square, if I may—in fact in some cases they are literally buried next to Martyrs Square. I actually, in the middle of one of the protests the other day, I had the idea of checking up on the tombs of these people, right next to the large Muhammad al-Amin mosque. I was curious to see how the demonstrators were treating them, and it was a fittingly reverent scene, there was a single policeman idly standing guard, and another man with his head bowed in prayer, presumably reciting the fatiha or something. It was an eerie, very moving, spectacle, and I say that as someone who isn't religious in the slightest. But my question, while I don't wish at all to disturb the ghosts of Martyrs Square, or rouse them from their graves, but I

wondered if you had any thoughts on what Kassir might have felt if he were around to see the demonstrations today.

Young: Look, I mean, Samir was a paradox. He was to a certain extent a bit of an idealist. And he was very much of a realist. In the sense that, you know, in 2005 he was of course, as you said, he participated within the demonstrations against Syria. He taught at the time at the St. Joseph University, so he was in contact with young people. But I mean he was a smart guy, he knew what politics was about, he knew the darker side of politics. So you know I think that he would look today and again, had he been alive, he would have looked at this as a very hopeful moment. And he would have looked for ways to try to turn this into something that is politically effective. That could really generate or help to generate change. This is where I think we have to understand that what we're seeing today is fascinating on one level, and a bit worrisome on the other, because as I said earlier I think it's a very good thing that this doesn't, this sort of population, does not have a leadership. Because this is what allows these protests to continue. But at some point, if someone wants to try to take this mood and to activate it politically, there has to be some kind of a transformation. And someone like Samir I think would have been very good in sort of gauging, or in trying to do such a thing. But you know there are other Samirs. I don't think he's the only one. I think there are other people who are perfectly aware of this. I don't know if they'll succeed or not. But I think there is in Lebanon quite a lot of people, and I think good people, people who are committed to the country's interest, who are willing to try to organize. To try to take advantage of what we're seeing today and try to transform it into something positive.

Whether it’s in elections, or whether it’s in some other fashion. I hope I’m right. But I do feel at least one thing: even if I’m wrong, we have crossed into a fundamentally new moment in Lebanon’s modern history today. It’s a fundamentally new moment, because the country has basically reached the bottom of the pit. So what is rebuilt has to be different than this.

Al-Jumhuriya: Michael, thank you very much indeed. It’s been a pleasure and a privilege.

Young: Thank you.

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